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SUBJECT: ERDOGAN VISIT TO DAMASCUS WAS FLAWLESS, SAYS
TURKISH AMBASSADOR

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Both the substance and the atmospherics of the December 22-23 visit that brought Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and a large cabinet-level delegation to Damascus were outstanding, according to diplomatic contacts. The visit saw the first meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council and the signing of 50 agreements and memoranda of understanding in fields ranging from transportation and security to energy and water. (See para 5 for a listing of topics.) Erdogan and President al-Asad, meeting primarily one-on-one, found their views nearly perfectly congruent regarding Middle East peace and Lebanon, and close together on Iraq, but possibly with a small bit of daylight between them concerning Iran's nuclear ambitions. End summary.

12. (C) Relaxing after his prime minister's stay in Damascus, which had required more than a solid week of intensive preparation, Turkish Ambassador Omer Onhon told CDA on December 27 that in his whole career he had never seen a visit go so smoothly. "I kept expecting something, even something minor, to go wrong," he crowed, "but nothing did." The official delegation comprised over a dozen ministers, most of them having at least brief separate meetings with their Syrian counterparts to discuss and sign agreements concerning subjects under their purview. President al-Asad had been a gracious host, twice coming to the hotel where his Turkish guests were staying, and personally drove Erdogan to their tour of the al-Taqqiya al-Suleimaniya handicrafts complex and mosque. The bulk of the two men's discussions had been tete-a-tete, according to the ambassador, who did not have extensive readouts to complement what the leaders had said in their press conference. He did offer the following tidbits:

-- Concerning Middle East peace, where Syria and Turkey see eye-to-eye on the desirability of Ankara's mediation with Israel, prospects for movement are dim given how little PM Netanyahu trusts Turkey. Onhon recounted that Erdogan had been plain-spoken, using a popular expression the ambassador translated as "unless asked to clean up the dust, we won't do it by ourselves" to reassure Asad that the ball is in Israel's court. Onhon did divulge, however, that he anticipated positive developments between his country and

Israel "in the first half or three weeks of January," just before an Arab League-Turkey meeting he will attend in Cairo. -- On Lebanon, Erdogan thanked Asad for playing a positive role in the formation of PM Hariri's government, expressing pleasure at Hariri's visit to Damascus earlier in the week and the positive Syrian response to him. -- With regard to Iraq, Erdogan asserted that instability hurts the entire region, especially Iraq's neighbors, and Asad concurred. -- Iran was discussed, Onhon confirmed. But Erdogan was apparently tight-lipped about this afterwards, perhaps indicating divergence of views on at least some matters. "I don't know what he said," the ambassador admitted, guessing that the prime minister embraced diplomacy rather than sanctions and reiterated Turkey's position that although peaceful nuclear power is acceptable, Iran should not get nuclear weapons.

13. (C) Other diplomats reported hearing from their Turkish and Syrian counterparts that the subject of Iraqi-Syrian relations absorbed more time than expected. (Note: The Turkish ambassador to Baghdad traveled to Damascus for Erdogan's visit. End note.) Neither side saw much hope for defusing the current tensions prior to Iraqi elections, however. Representatives of Iraq, Syria and Turkey had briefly met during the Arab-Turkish Forum ministerial in Damascus on December 16 but the meeting was "pointless." "Why should we talk to the Iraqis about anything directly," wondered a Syrian Foreign Ministry contact, "when the Iraqis want to have the UN involved and when FM Zebari says he's coming and then doesn't come?" Arab embassies and the Turks

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here interpret the December 21 visit to Damascus of former Iraqi PM Iyad Allawi as a signal that the SARG will support Allawi in the upcoming election.

14. (U) Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Utri chaired the Syrian side for the first meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. Under the Council's auspices more than four dozen agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) were signed, the most ambitious envisioning the eventual irrigation of 150,000 hectares of farmland in al-Hasakah province using water drawn from the Tigris River, the construction of a dam on the Orontes River for power generation and irrigation, and the linking of Syria's natural gas pipeline to the Nabucco pipeline that crosses Turkey from central Asia into Europe. Some of the MOUs signed in December represented the culmination of preparatory work that had taken place during earlier visits throughout the fall; Ambassador Onhon indicated that still more MOUs remain to be finalized. All told, the two sides hope to increase their bilateral trade to USD 5 billion annually from its current level of USD 2 billion.

15. (U) The 50 MOUs covered a wide variety of topics, with the largest number (8) having to do with health-related cooperation. Other fields included trade and transportation (5), security and borders (5), water (4), agriculture and animal husbandry (3), housing and construction (3), education (3), two each concerning media, culture, science, diplomacy, and the oil and gas sectors, one each in tourism, meteorology and environment, and four miscellaneous cooperation agreements.

16. (U) Media recap: The Syrian media warmly welcomed the visit of the Turkish prime minister and highlighted the signing of the memoranda of understanding. The government-owned newspapers prominently featured positive stories regarding the meetings between Asad and Erdogan. Tishreen's headline read, "A Busy Day with Turkey: Signing the Agreements Has Redrawn the Map of the Middle East and Broken the Borders between the Two Countries." Privately owned Al-Watan's lead headline read, "Syria and Turkey Establish a Better Future. Erdogan: Syria is our Gateway to the World." In addition to front-page stories, all papers

dedicated one or two inside pages to the talks. Coverage of the visit was also widespread on Syrian radio and television news and talk shows.

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